

PALMER PHYSICAL LABORATORY

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY

3 May 1963

Mr. Mark Van Doren  
Falls Village, Conn.

Dear Mr. Van Doren,

I would like to explain to you why I feel unable to sign your Open Letter to the President of the United States, and why I believe that letters of this nature are likely to do more harm than good.

The United States is engaged in complicated negotiations with the Soviet Union, in which the fate of the United States and of freedom in this world hang in the balance. These are difficult negotiations with an obviously shrewd and determined adversary, and would be trying enough even under the best circumstances. They are made, however, even more difficult if our negotiators are constantly under pressure to give in by some of our own people who are, undoubtedly, well-meaning but who surely do not help our side. I might think differently if there were similar groups among the Russian people or if you could and would influence the Russian side to make concessions also. As it is, the pressure on our negotiators does not even facilitate an agreement: the yielding of our negotiators to pressures such as you propose here is compensated by the increased pertinacity of the opponent, which knows about your attempt to influence our side.

Let me tell you, second, that I find many statements in your letter ambiguous, and even misleading. Thus, the statement that "our national security will remain inviolate under a test ban treaty" (the second declaration which you want the President to make) does not even mention the need for controls and inspections, and can be easily quoted out of context to prove that such are not necessary. In addition, the question of controls and inspection is one of number and kind, and the argument between the USSR and our country centers just on these points. These questions involve technical judgment which neither you nor I can assess fully. Finally, I think it is very dangerous to make statements such as "this expression of our support I have reason to know will be welcomed by him". An opposite statement could equally well be made, and it seems to me that the President should come out and say openly what his views are and in what directions he needs our support.

Sincerely yours,

*Eugene P. Wigner*  
Eugene P. Wigner

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